

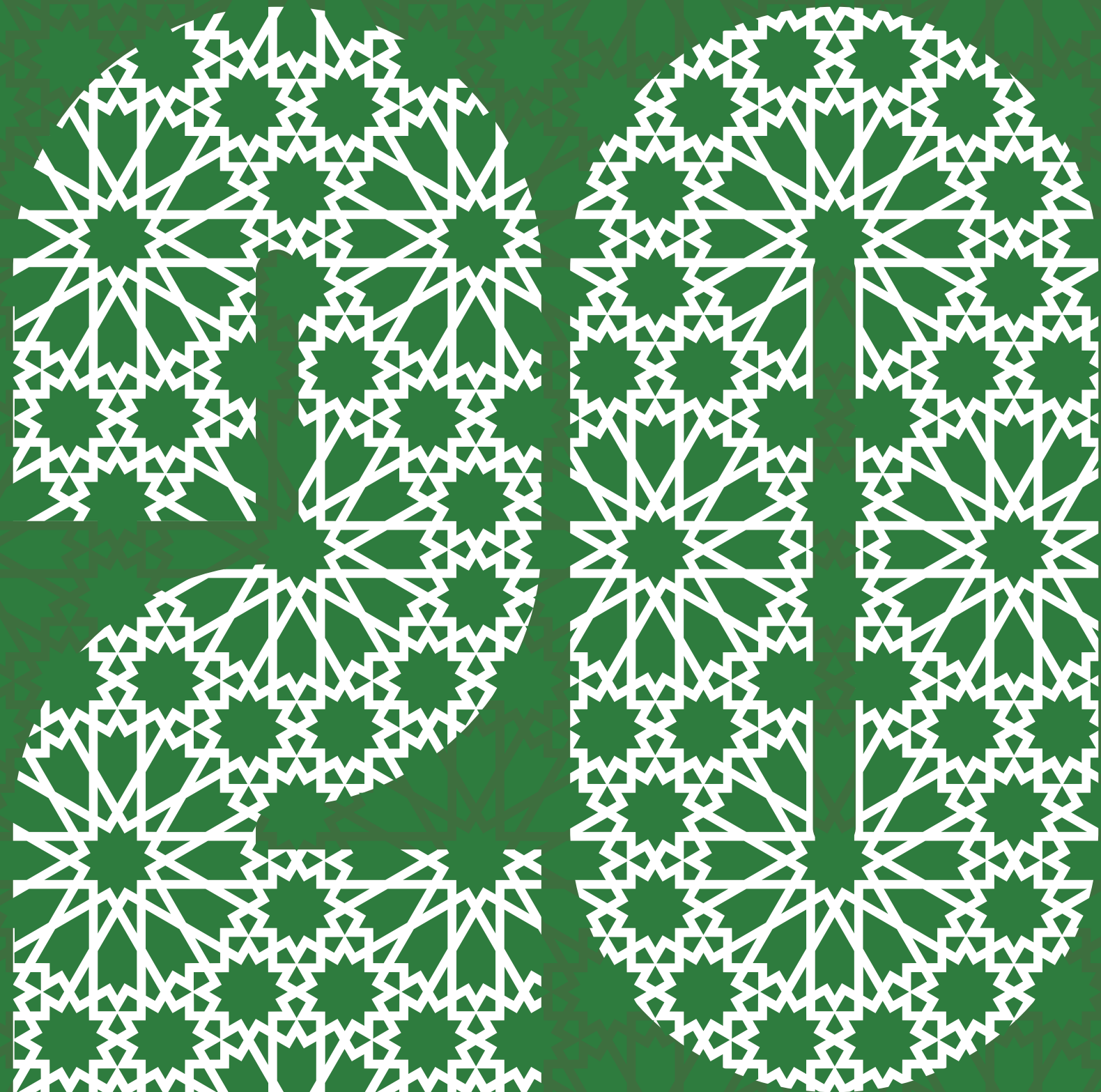


THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

# Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations

2002—2022





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[www.aku.edu/ismc](http://www.aku.edu/ismc)

Aga Khan Centre, 10 Handyside Street, King's Cross, London N1C 4DN, UK





*“The Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations is a place where people of every background are encouraged to ask what they might learn about the human condition from the civilisations that have been built by Muslims from Spain to Indonesia, from the 7th to the 21st centuries. It is meant to provide people with the tools to answer such a profound question for themselves, and to contribute to improving the welfare of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.”*

His Highness, Aga Khan IV



# AKU-ISM



One of the principal objectives in the founding of AKU-ISM, the MA programme in Muslim Cultures has since 2006 provided a dynamic forum for scholars of the present and future to explore and discuss the complex challenges facing Muslim cultures and contexts.



**The Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISM) was established in 2002 in London, United Kingdom, and 2022 marks its 20th anniversary. A research-grounded, non-denominational, liberal arts institute producing internationally recognised scholarship, education and outreach, AKU-ISM is founded on a scholarly and pluralistic approach to, and understanding of, Islam and Muslim cultures. Its mission is to participate in the creation and dissemination of knowledge about Muslim societies in all their historic and present-day complexity and diversity. Today AKU-ISM is part of an expansive university network, with thirteen campuses spread across three continents.**



*“At its heart, AKU-ISM is a research-focused institution driven by the belief that academic enquiry and education can enable understanding and positive social change.”*

**Leif Stenberg**, Dean and Professor of Islamic Studies, AKU-ISM

## Research Grounded, Education Driven

The Institute’s research into the literature, history, governance, pop culture and languages in Muslim contexts, as well as the archaeology and art history of the Muslim cultures of the Indian Ocean, have been the foundation from which its Master of Arts (MA) in Muslim Cultures has sprung and flourished. Added to this is a successful programme of short courses, both in the UK and abroad, ranging in topics from Muslim Family Law to Music in Islamic Contexts to Manuscripts in Arabic Script. The Institute has also established collaborations and partnerships with a number of universities and institutions of higher education around the world – most recently a dual MA degree with Columbia University in New York.



AKU-ISM regularly organises and hosts important conferences and seminars, such as this one on *Muslim Cultures of the Indian Ocean* in 2018.

## Scholarship in Action

AKU-ISM annually hosts a wide range of popular lectures and talks, open to academics, students and the general public. Conferences and seminars have been an important part of the Institute’s active programme, from the first conference in 2003 on encyclopaedias of Muslim civilisations to 2022’s *Islamic Legal Studies Conference* and *Praying on the Pitch: Football, Religion and Social Identities*.

Since 2009, the Institute has established three well-respected book series with Edinburgh University Press, as well as an academic journal on material culture in Muslim contexts with Brill. This is in addition to the extensive publications that have been produced over twenty years by an active faculty. In 2019, the Institute launched a series of Occasional Papers, providing an Open Access digital platform for new scholarship from within the Institute and beyond.

Housed in the beautiful Aga Khan Centre, the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations lies at the very heart of the Aga Khan University’s ambition to establish a world-class liberal arts programme.



Fieldwork is an important part of AKU-ISM’s research, whether it be a community-based water management project in Gilgit-Baltistan or archaeology at Lahore Fort in Pakistan.



# Bedford Square 2002–2009

Bedford Square – the Institute's first home from 2002 to 2009. One of the great survivals of Georgian London, and close to the British Museum, it was designed and built by Thomas Leverton between 1775 and 1783.





**The Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations first began operations in premises in Bedford square. Located close to the British Museum in central London, as well as the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the new British Library, it was an ideal location for the new institute. But, as with most newborns, the story of its creation began much earlier.**



Meeting of the Task Force c. 1999–2000.

**His Own Initiative**

The initiative to establish the Institute came from His Highness, the Aga Khan IV, in his capacity as Chancellor of the Aga Khan University. In the wake of the university’s 10th anniversary, a commission was set up in 1994 to explore pathways the university could follow to complement its well-established and flourishing activities in the health sciences. The commission’s findings recommended the creation of several specialised institutes, including one that studied and examined Muslim societies, using the tools of the humanities and social sciences. It would be an institution to foster critical enquiry and the study of the ideas of Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers across different disciplines, from culture, history, law and religion to anthropology, political science and sociology.

Reports found that critical enquiry of this kind was constrained within Muslim-majority countries by various forms of censorship and nationalist politics. Therefore, when searching for the ideal location to host the Institute, there was a strong sense that a multicultural hub like London would be ideal – a city where the Institute could act as an effective bridge between different Muslim and non-Muslim communities and academic centres. Throughout its inception and formative period, it was taken for granted that the Institute would acknowledge the multiplicity and pluralism of Islam, as well as the variable ways it could manifest into lived realities for those living in Muslim contexts – whether that be in the Middle East, the Indian Ocean region, Central, South or East Asia or indeed in North or South America, Africa or Europe.

**Task At Hand**

The Aga Khan University assembled the Task Force, which was led by Dr Abdou Filali-Ansary, who was the Founding Director of the King Abdul-Aziz Foundation for Islamic Studies and Human Sciences in Morocco. It also included Dr Frances Sutton, from the Chancellor’s original commission, Dr Azim Nanji, Director of the Institute of Ismaili Studies (1998–2008), and Dr Roy Mottahedeh of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard. One of the first things the Task Force established was that the new institute would offer a full-time Master’s programme, whose graduates would help to stimulate broader and more critical approaches to the development of Islam and Muslim societies, and to the relationship between cultural and religious ideas and socio-economic development in Muslim societies. The Institute would also offer specialist short courses on topics in Muslim contexts geared to teachers, journalists, lawyers, physicians and diplomats, as well as Muslim religious scholars who were resident in Europe. It was also envisaged that AKU-ISMC would assist with the development of curricula of AKU’s nascent Faculty of Arts and Sciences, as well as in the education about Muslim communities and cultures in secondary schools in the UK and elsewhere. The Institute should also aim to develop external linkages to other universities. The goal would be to create an institution in a state of constant evolution, pursuing education and conducting research independently of any particular theoretical approach.

These first objectives would be the heart of the new institute’s operations and they have remained so up to today. In the intervening two decades, the need for scholarly research on what can broadly be defined as Muslim cultures of the past and present has become even more crucial.



**Dr Abdou Filali-Ansary**

A scholar and professor of modern philosophy, Dr Filali-Ansary taught at the Mohammed V University in Rabat, where he also served as the university’s secretary-general from 1980 to 1984. He then became the Founding Director of the King Abdul-Aziz Foundation for Islamic Studies and Human Sciences in Casablanca, Morocco, from 1984 to 2001. In 2002 he became the Founding Director of the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations.



**Launching Operations**

Dr Filali-Ansary was asked to be the Institute’s first Director. He and a small team set about establishing the infrastructure by which the Institute could operate – including the setting up of a web page and the kernel of what would become the AKU-ISMC library. Early members of that team were Razia Velji and Saima Ali, who joined the administrative staff in 2003 and 2005, respectively, and remained through the years, helping to shape and form the functioning of the Institute.

In 2003, Dr Farid Panjwani, specialising in education theory and practice, and Dr Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, specialising in Islamic philosophy and civilisation, joined as the first teaching staff, followed the next year by Dr Sonja Brentjes, specialising in mathematics in mediaeval Islam. They began planning and executing a curriculum for the Master’s programme, and preparing to welcome the first students in September 2006.

The Institute also launched its ambitious and high-profile programme of academic conferences, beginning with 2003’s *Organising Knowledge: Encyclopaedic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Muslim World*, out of which would grow one of AKU-ISMC’s first publications series: Muslim Civilisations Abstracts. The short-course programme was also launched this year, with topics including Islamic Law for Practitioners and Academic and Summer Courses for Teachers in Karachi. Part of the latter was a very successful course in 2005 for secondary school teachers in Pakistan to introduce them to approaches for the classroom to the study of Islam and Muslims. This year also saw the first of four seminars on *Approaches to Pluralism in Muslim Contexts*, out of which ultimately would come the first book in another key publication series: Exploring Muslim Contexts. These were followed by 2005’s *Higher Education Conference: Developing Countries with a Focus on Muslim Contexts*, organised by Dr Panjwani.



(above) The first incarnation of AKU-ISMC’s library.



(above) Dr Filali-Ansary and Dr Sheila Canby of the British Museum at the 2005 *Higher Education Conference: Developing Countries with a Focus on Muslim Contexts*.



(left) Visit in 2002 of a delegation of librarians from Indonesia.

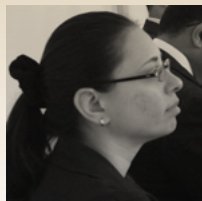
(above) Drs Roy Mottahedeh and Ridwan Al-Sayyid at the 2003 Encyclopaedia Conference.



(above) Moncef Ben Abdeljelil and Farid Panjwani joined the academic staff of AKU-ISMC in 2003.



*“In the early days, AKU-ISMC was akin to the youngest sibling in a family – given a lot of attention and clearly very close to the heart of the Chancellor. Over the last 20 years, I have watched the Institute overcome its teething pains while strengthening its sense of purpose. This has been due to wise counsel of our leadership, partners and friends and the hard work of many committed faculty and staff.”*



**Razia Velji**  
Senior Advisor, University Special Projects and HR Strategy, AKU and Coordinator of Planning and Academic Development (2003–2013) and Manager of Research Development and Planning (2013–18) at AKU-ISMC.



(above and right) AKU-ISMC's *Certificate Course for Teachers: Histories and Cultures of Muslims*, in Karachi, 2006.



(left) AKU-ISMC's short course in Diplomatic training, run by Dr Abdou Filali-Ansary.

### First Cohort

In September 2006 the Institute's MA programme was officially launched, with a first cohort of fifteen students arriving from all over: Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. At this point, Drs Arif Jamal, Sarah Bowen Savant and Stefan Weber joined the faculty. Arif's speciality was law, while Bowen Savant and Weber were cultural historians. The Institute's faculty thus provided a broad spread of expertise across the field of Islamic Studies, with links to Pakistan, Indonesia, Tunisia, Iran, Europe and North America. Their teaching was supplemented by high-profile visiting lecturers, including the historians Wadad Kadi (University of Chicago) and Aziz al-Azmeh (Central European University in Budapest) and scholars of Islamic Studies like Ridwan Al-Sayyid (Lebanese University).

In these early years, the Master's was a two-year programme and the curriculum was constantly adapted and fine-tuned in consultation with both faculty and students by a team of external reviewers including Dr Kadi, the philosopher and educationalist Sir Roger Scruton, Dr Hossein Modarressi, the Islamic jurist and scholar from Princeton University, and the sociologist Dr Deniz Kandiyoti of SOAS.

### All Systems Go!

The years 2007 and 2008 saw the arrival of the second and third cohorts of students (as well the graduation of the first cohort in 2008). And joining the staff were Drs Aptin Khanbaghi, Modjtaba Sadria, Kathryn Spellman-Poots and Jeff Tan. Dr Khanbaghi brought his interests in the cultural diversity of the Muslim world, with a special interest in its religious minorities as a senior researcher and manager of the MCA (Muslim Civilisations Abstracts) project until its completion. Dr Sadria brought his expertise in knowledge construction in Muslim societies, while Dr Spellman-Poots brought her focuses on Muslims in Europe and North America, the Iranian diaspora, transnational migration and gender studies. Dr Tan came from a background in political economy with particular expertise in urban infrastructure (especially water and sanitation).

The Short Course programme also continued apace with two courses focused on diplomatic training for Muslim contexts taught by Dr Filali-Ansary and one led by Dr Jamal on Muslim cultures, followed by another in early 2009 by Dr Panjwani on law in Muslim contexts. In 2008, AKU-ISMC also hosted the *Understanding Cities in Muslim Societies* conference.

Bedford Square was now too small for the fast-growing institute. It was time to leave the nursery.



**Professor Sarah Bowen Savant** is a cultural historian of the Middle East and Iran, c. 600–1100. She is also Principal Investigator of the KITAB (Knowledge, Information, Technology & the Arabic Book) Project.



**Dr Jeff Tan** is Associate Professor of Political Economy. His research interests centre on how social forces and economic imperatives shape institutions and economic development.



# Euston Road 2009–2018

210 Euston Road offered AKU-ISMC spacious, modern interim quarters while its new home in King's Cross was being built.





The period around 2009 was a significant moment of change. The Institute moved to new premises at 210 Euston Road, where they were joined by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and the Aga Khan Foundation (UK). The new building was meant to be an interim premises until all three entities could move in to the Aga Khan Centre, being planned in the redevelopment of nearby King’s Cross. Over the years, AKU-ISMC has benefited greatly from this relationship with both the IIS and the Aga Khan Foundation (UK), retaining its own strong identity as part of AKU, while also pooling resources with these institutions in the shared management of library, office and teaching space.

A Change in Leadership

In 2009, Dr Filali-Ansary stepped down from the position of Director, although he would remain active as a member of the Institute, contributing to the development of AKU-ISMC’s rich research environment. He was replaced by Farouk Topan as Interim Director. Dr Topan came to AKU-ISMC following a prestigious career teaching Swahili language and literature at Dar es Salaam University, the Institute of Ismaili Studies and the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

There were also some departures in the faculty: Dr Ben Abdeljelil left and would ultimately take up the post of Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences at the University of Sousse in Tunisia; Dr Jalil went to the National University of Singapore; Dr Weber left to become Director of the Islamic Art Museum in Berlin and Dr Sadria left to pursue research in Japan. However, the Institute gained Dr Arskal Salim, who brought his interests in the legal ethnography of Muslim societies.

“Integrating the AKU-ISMC degree and courses into the British University system of quality assessment was a priority for us. Our MA was accorded due recognition by NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centre) and the British Accreditation Council. And we were delighted that our first QAA Review in June 2012 was successful – the first tooth of a baby institution!”

Dr Farouk Topan

Recognition of Excellence

Dr Topan oversaw a substantial revision of the teaching programme, giving greater cohesion to the Institute’s wide-ranging scholarship and teaching and further encouraging the vibrant environment of intellectual creativity fuelled by such a range of scholars teaching alongside one another. This period was also a key moment of institutionalisation, with the MA programme going through evaluations by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) – which regulates Higher Education in the United Kingdom. Dr Topan’s considerable experience in Higher Education in Great Britain helped anchor AKU-ISMC more thoroughly in the British academic environment. The Institute also successfully acquired recognition for its MA as the equivalent of a British Master’s degree from UK-NARIQ, the organisation that ranks foreign-awarded degrees according to their British equivalents.

The Short Course programme also continued to develop, with Arskal Salim heading *Muslim Family Law: Theories and Practices* in spring 2011, closely followed by *Mediation and Arbitration in Muslim Legal Practice*. Other notable short courses that year were *Jews, Christians and Others Among Muslims: History, Status and Vigour* (led by Dr Khanbaghi) and *Introduction to the Qur’an: Texts, Contexts and Contests*.



Dr Farouk Topan

Dr Topan received his PhD from SOAS, University of London, and subsequently taught Swahili literature at the University of Dar es Salaam and at the University of Nairobi. He was also a Research Scholar and Head of the Teacher Training Programme at the Institute of Ismaili Studies from 1977 to 1993, and headed up the Swahili programme at SOAS until 2006. He has published widely on various aspects of Swahili literature, religion, spirit possession and identity in East Africa. He is also a successful playwright whose works are considered landmarks of Swahili literature.





**Dr Walid Ghali** is Head Librarian and also Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at AKU-ISMC. A specialist of Arabic manuscripts, he has also published a short story collection in Arabic.



(above) The Joint IIS-ISMC Library at 210 Euston Road.

(right) Publications and papers from the Mohammed Arkoun collection.

**Library in Metamorphosis**

The new building played host to a number of conferences, seminars and workshops in its first year. In October, the Institute hosted a timely festschrift conference for the giant of contemporary Islamic philosophy, Mohammed Arkoun. Arkoun subsequently passed away soon after in 2010, and his family graciously gifted his research library and personal and professional papers to the newly formed library created out of combining the books of both the IIS and AKU-ISMC. This Joint IIS-ISMC Library now boasted over 54,000 books and other resources on Muslim cultures. In the following years it would come to include several important collections, encompassing Ottoman manuscripts, a collection of papers of the great 19th-century Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh, and the research libraries and papers of great scholars like Dr Farhad Daftary, Dr Annemarie Schimmel and Dr Peter Avery. All these have helped to make the library an important centre in and of itself for research into the Muslim humanities. In 2014, the library would gain a Head Librarian in Dr Walid Ghali, who, in addition, would bring his considerable knowledge of Arabic manuscript traditions.

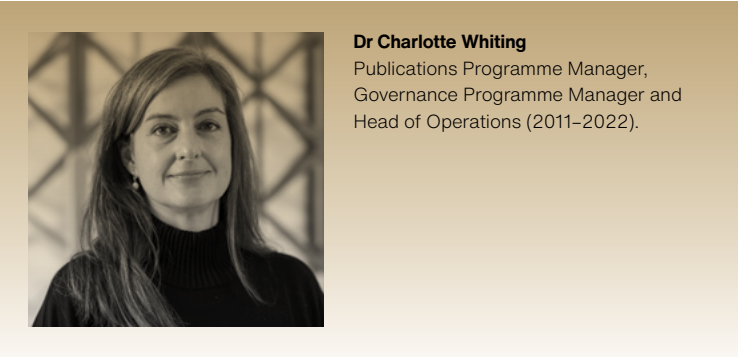


**AKU-ISMC Publications**

The first year at Euston Road also saw the first publications by the Institute. Dr Filali-Ansary had been developing with Edinburgh University Press (EUP) three different book series to showcase the Institute’s critical scholarship on Muslim societies. Dr Charlotte Whiting, who joined the Institute in 2011, would ultimately take on overseeing the quickly developing list of AKU-ISMC publications.

The first series was Muslim Civilisations Abstracts, which had developed out of the 2003 encyclopaedia conference, and in 2009 AKU-ISMC and EUP published the *Encyclopedias about Muslim Civilisations*, edited by Dr Khanbaghi. It would be followed by two more volumes in 2012 and 2014.

Published in the same month were the first volumes of two other new book series with EUP. The Exploring Muslim Contexts series was launched by two books. The first, *The Challenge of Pluralism: Paradigms from Muslim Contexts*, edited by Dr Filali-Ansary, had also grown out of one of the Institute’s first series of seminars: *Approaches to Pluralism in Muslim Contexts*. The second was *Development Models in Muslim Contexts: Chinese, ‘Islamic’ and Neo-Liberal Alternatives*, edited by Robert Springborg. And from the new In Translation series there was Abdelmajjid Charfi’s *Islam: Between Message and History*.



**Dr Charlotte Whiting**  
Publications Programme Manager,  
Governance Programme Manager and  
Head of Operations (2011–2022).



The first year of AKU-ISMC publications saw the release of four titles: *Encyclopedias about Muslim Civilisations*, *The Challenge of Pluralism*, *Development Models in Muslim Contexts* and *Islam: Between Message and History*.



Both Exploring Muslim Contexts and In Translation aimed to deconstruct essentialist views about the 'Muslim world'. For example, the In Translation series, with Charfi's book and 2013's *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power* by Ali Abdel Razek, demonstrated how societies in Europe and North America can learn from philosophical thinking produced in Africa, Asia or the Middle East. By 2018, Exploring Muslim Contexts could boast of seven titles, including the seminal *Ethnographies of Islam* of 2013 and *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies* of 2014, each of which challenged pre-existing notions about Muslim-context societies and cultures. The Abstracts series came to an end after 2014, but Exploring Muslim Contexts and In Translation are both still going strong today.



Exploring Muslim Contexts and In Translation were, and continue to be, AKU-ISMC's flagship publication series.

**Arabic Pasts**  
In 2009, the first of the AKU-sponsored *Arabic Pasts* conferences on historiography was organised by AKU-ISMC together with SOAS and Oxford University. An informal workshop first begun in 2007 at SOAS, *Arabic Pasts* explores history writing in Arabic as well as more broadly how people – past and present – have related to the past. The conference series has continued to provide a forum to discuss methodologies, research agendas and case studies related to Arabic in any region and in any period from the seventh century to the present. It has grown organically, shepherded at AKU-ISMC by Dr Bowen Savant – retaining its informal and friendly atmosphere, and developing into a regular, annual event for scholars of early Islamic history in Europe, North America and in Muslim majority countries. AKU-ISMC became the regular host of *Arabic Pasts* in 2018, and in October 2022 will hold the sixteenth annual seminar.



**Muslim Contexts of the Indian Ocean**  
In 2012, the faculty was joined by archaeologist Dr Stéphane Pradines, who brought extensive experience of excavation in Egypt, sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean region. The latter area scholars have increasingly come to recognise as being central to the study of Muslim cultures. Over more than a millennium, cultural encounters and the interconnections and mobility among Muslim communities throughout the Indian Ocean region have generated a 'cultural continuum' whose diversity is reflected in the exchange of knowledge, beliefs, practices, scholarship, trade, commerce and other endeavours. Together with Dr Topan, Dr Pradines has helped to make AKU-ISMC a centre for the study of Indian Ocean cultures, and the first conference at the King's Cross home was in September 2018 when the Institute hosted *Muslim Cultures in the Indian Ocean: Diversity and Pluralism, Past and Present* (selected papers from which are soon to come out as the most recent volume of the Exploring Muslim Contexts series).



**Dr Stéphane Pradines** is Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture. He is a specialist of Islamic archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa, of Indian Ocean mediaeval trade and Muslim military architecture and weaponry.



Dr Pradines and team at work in Tanzania.





**Dr David Taylor**

A student of the politics and history of South Asia, Dr Taylor’s first degree in History was from the University of Cambridge in 1966. He then moved to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where he took his PhD in Political Science in 1972. From 1971 to 2002, he continued to teach at SOAS and was variously Senior Lecturer in Politics, Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Pro-Director for Teaching and Learning. In 2002, he joined AKU in Karachi as Vice-Provost for Academic Development and served as Interim Provost from 2003 to 2008.

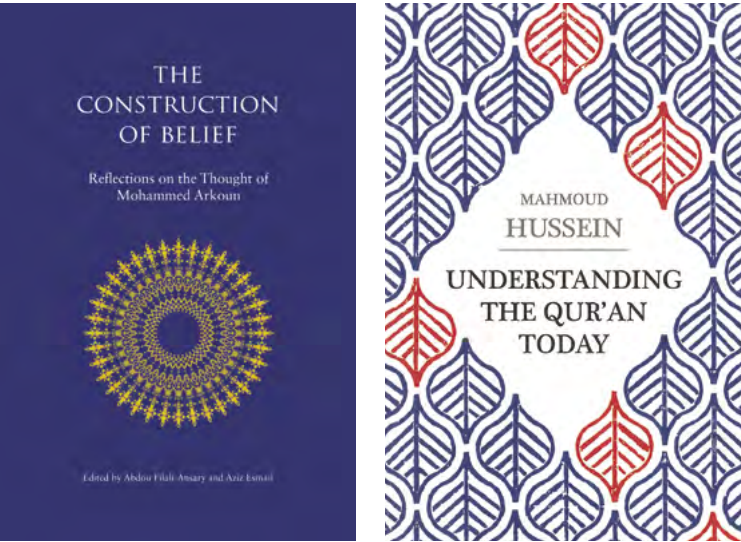
**Furthering Education**

In 2013, Dr Topan stepped down from his role as Interim Director to focus on teaching and research at the Institute. He was succeeded by Dr David Taylor. Dr Taylor had previously been Acting Provost of AKU and of SOAS and he brought considerable experience, particularly in the management of QAA expectations. This period saw further crucial steps taken to align the MA programme with British Higher Education requirements. Dr Taylor’s period as Director similarly witnessed a streamlining of academic governance.

At this time measures were also taken to further refine the curriculum for the students to make the study load more in line with UK norms in higher education. One result was to make the MA a one-year course as opposed to the two years more usual in North America. Dr Taylor also encouraged faculty to take up training offered by London’s Institute of Education and to engage in reciprocal observation of one another’s teaching. This was an early but significant step towards a comprehensive training of faculty in pedagogics. Today, the Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom is part of a UK-accredited network of quality assurance and improvement in higher education, and the Institute’s faculty are trained together with colleagues from the various campuses of AKU. Important steps were also taken to improve the Institute’s profile by introducing a communications and marketing department, whose mandate included advertising the MA programme, short courses, and lecture series.

During this period, AKU-ISMC Publications also produced three independent books, the first being a volume edited by Dr Filali-Ansary, and arising out of the 2009 festschrift for Mohammed Arkoun – *The Construction of Belief: Reflections on the Thought of Mohammed Arkoun*. The second was Mahmoud Hussein’s *Understanding the Qur’an Today* and finally there was *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond* of 2014. The latter, organised and edited by Drs Spellman-Poots, Martin Webb and Pnina Werbner, was also a subject of a landmark exhibition at Euston Road.

In 2016, the Institute also hosted an important international conference on Media in Muslim Contexts, which was attended by members of the new AKU Graduate School of Media and Communications in Nairobi and scholars from the Universidade Católica Portuguesa.

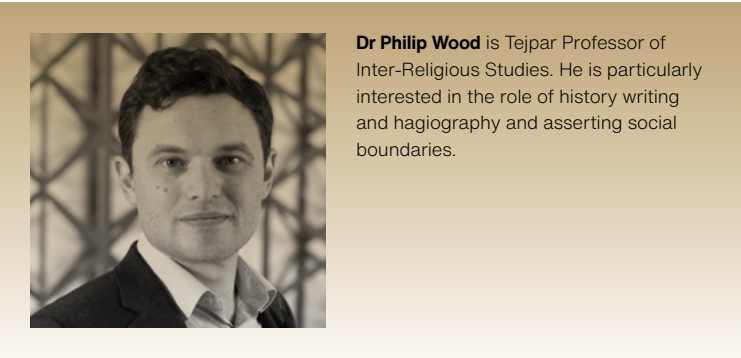


*The Construction of Belief* was a solid work of scholarship about a great modern thinker, but both *Understanding the Qur’an Today* and *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest* captured a kind of zeitgeist, and attracted a great deal of attention beyond academia.



Revolutionising History

Around 2014 a project long nurtured by Dr Bowen Savant began to grow and take shape. The project’s interest was in pairing historical and literary expertise with computer science to explore the history of the Arabic book using digital methods. As Principal Investigator of KITAB (Knowledge, Information Technology & the Arabic Book), Dr Bowen Savant came up with the idea from using plagiarism software. She realised that similar software might be developed for the thousands of Arabic machine-readable book files freely available on the internet. She assembled a team of volunteers that included software



“My experience as Director of AKU-ISMC was one of the most exciting times of my career. It was wonderful to work with highly motivated and engaged groups of students, and the faculty at AKU-ISMC are doing fascinating work in so many fields. They’re prepared to challenge conventional orthodoxies and to use the methodologies of the humanities and social sciences to deepen our understanding of Muslim civilisations and cultures.”

Dr David Taylor

developers and that met weekly on Sundays. They began to adapt software to detect and visualise relationships between Arabic-script books with a method called ‘text reuse detection’. In 2014, historian Dr Philip Wood joined the faculty, bringing with him a rich engagement with mediaeval and early modern history in West Asia, particularly those of non-Muslim minorities. The Institute started seriously to examine how history-writing functions as a normative discourse as well as a record of fact. Chronicles, saints’ lives, works of law, genealogy, liturgy or the dictionaries of Muslim scholars serve to affirm identities by setting out the ties between individuals and between individuals and places. Such texts delineate boundaries between populations and idealise perfect behaviours within populations. In a social reality that was, in fact, messy, they attempt to bring a different, ideal reality into existence, through narratives in which a cast of villains and heroes illustrate what it meant to be a good Muslim, a good Christian or a good Jew. Dr Wood’s recent monograph, *The Imam of the Christians: The World of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, C. 750–850* provides one example of this research, which reads historical works in Arabic and Syriac alongside one another to analyse how one community leader positioned himself with regard to his Christian coreligionists and his Muslim sponsors.

Governance Programme

In 2014, Dr Filali-Ansary spearheaded the establishment of a programme exploring governance in Muslim contexts, and in 2015 Dr Gianluca Parolin was recruited to be Faculty Lead. But it is a programme that the research of several members of the faculty have elided with on a more informal level, such as with the work of Dr Spellman-Poots, Dr Tan and Dr Sevgi Adak, who joined AKU-ISMC in 2016. She brought with her a research focus on politics and gender in West Asia, particularly in Turkey.



The notion of studying governance in all its various aspects was an idea promoted by the Task Force. The aim of the Governance Programme is to create a platform for academics, policy makers, journalists, activists and others for passionate, informed and open discussion of matters of relevance to governance in Muslim-majority contexts. Since its inception, the Programme has pursued this goal through the organisation of large annual conferences, standalone workshops on topical matters and an annual series of in-depth lectures on selected themes. The first was 2015’s *The Governance of Water Resources in Muslim Contexts in Rabat*, followed in 2017 by *Governance and Gender in Muslim Contexts*. The papers presented at the latter would ultimately be published in AKU-ISMC’s Exploring Muslim Contexts series in 2019 as *Gender, Governance and Islam*.








(left and below) Drs Bowen Savant and Wood in action in the classroom. And the students are quick to assess and engage.



*“ISMC offered me diverse approaches, perspectives and tools to understand the contexts in which Muslims live today and the societies in which they live, broadening the scope of my understanding.”*



**Hinna Hussein.** Graduated 2016.  
Now Manager of Alumni Affairs, Habib University.



## Creation of the Dean

On 1 April 2017, Dr David Taylor stepped down as Director of the Institute. He was succeeded by Dr Leif Stenberg, a professor in Islamic Studies, who arrived from Lund University, Sweden. Dr Stenberg assumed the position as Dean, and was given the task of expanding the research output of the Institute, diversifying and developing the Master’s programme, and expanding AKU-ISMC’s outreach. The overall task was to develop and strengthen the academic profile of the Institute, but also to continue to improve its structures and develop the connection between AKU-ISMC and AKU. He was also tasked with moving the Institute into its new home in the Aga Khan Centre at King’s Cross.



## Dr Leif Stenberg

Dr Stenberg received a PhD in History of Religions from Lund University. From 1996 to 1997 he was Assistant Professor in the History of Religions at Uppsala University, and from 1997 until 1999 he was Visiting Scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. The following year, Dr Stenberg was Visiting Scholar at the Institut Français d’Études Arabes de Damas (IFEAD) in Damascus, Syria. From 2001 to 2017 he taught Islamic Studies at Lund University, becoming full professor and then the Founding Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. He joined AKU-ISMC in 2017 as its Dean, and is also a professor in AKU’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences.



(left and above) The students of the 2016 cohort, in front of the British Library during their first term in 2015 and at their graduation in 2016.



Designed by Fumihiko Maki, the Aga Khan Centre in King's Cross is home not only to AKU-ISMC, but also to the Aga Khan Foundation (UK), the Institute of Ismaili Studies, as well as the Aga Khan Library and the Aga Khan Centre Gallery.

# King's Cross 2018 to present







On 26 June 2018, the Aga Khan Centre in King's Cross had its grand opening ceremony, which was attended by His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, London Mayor Sadiq Khan and His Highness, Aga Khan IV. The purpose-built new centre, years in the planning and construction, was envisaged as not just a physical home for the institutions located within it, but also a repository for education, knowledge, cultural exchange and insight into Muslim civilisations.

Views of two of the Aga Khan Centre's famous gardens, integrated into the structure of the building. Each garden is inspired by Islamic horticultural masterpieces – in this case, the magnificent gardens and fountains of Mughal India and ancient Persia.



(above) His Highness, the Aga Khan, opens the Centre with His Royal Highness Prince Charles.

(right) His Highness, the Aga Khan, tours the new library with the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan.







At the very heart of the Aga Khan Centre, the Aga Khan Library is a state-of-the-art media centre, offering one of the best research collections for Islamic Studies to be found anywhere in the world.

## Centre for Education, Knowledge and Cultural Exchange

The Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations moved into its new home alongside The Institute of Ismaili Studies and The Aga Khan Foundation (UK). The Aga Khan Centre Gallery is on the ground floor with the primary class and assembly rooms on the first and second floors.

The library, now renamed the Aga Khan Library, is housed at the very heart of the building on the third and fourth floors in splendid, climate-controlled new premises. It has become

a leading resource in the field of Islamic Studies, with its staff of librarians combining their research interests with their daily activities and projects. In 2019, there was another significant milestone: the development of the Aga Khan Library Digital Collections platform with the aim of preserving, displaying and facilitating online access to the library's special collections.

The four floors above the library house the administrative and faculty offices of the two institutes and foundation. The top floor, with its gardens inspired by Islamic prototypes, has stunning views over central London.



The Aga Khan Library is home to an important collection of Arabic-language manuscripts.





An Ambitious Restructure

In tune with the new premises and to complement the enhancement of administrative structures, Dr Stenberg created a number of new roles to streamline operations and delegate institutional work effectively. These new roles included a Head of Educational Programmes, for which he recruited Dr Stephen M. Lyons, who joined the Institute after many years of fieldwork in Pakistan as well as being an active faculty member of the Department of Anthropology at Durham University. A Head of Research was also created, and Dr Jonas Otterbeck from Lund University joined the Institute and took up this position, bringing his knowledge of Muslim communities in Europe. In 2021, Dr Alex Bellem joined with the task of forming a Language Centre for the Institute. Dr Whiting moved from her position overseeing AKU-ISMC’s publications to take on the newly created role of Head of Operations of the entirety of ISMC in 2021.

Events and conferences also continued apace in the first two years at the new premises: among them was the exhibition and publication of activist Bahia Shehab’s street art.



(left) Two Directors and a Dean.  
(right) Bahia Shehab electrified with her book of street art, *At the Corner of a Dream*, confronting the legacy of the Arab Spring. AKU-ISMC accompanied its publication with a launch and exhibition at the centre’s new Aga Khan Centre Gallery.



**Dr Stephen M. Lyons** is Professor of Anthropology & Head of Educational Programmes. He is a cultural anthropologist with an interest in social organisation, cultural systems, conflict and development in rural and urban Pakistan.



**Dr Alex Bellem** is Assistant Professor and Language Programme Coordinator. She is a linguist specialising in comparative-theoretical phonology (and the interface with phonetics) and Arabic dialectology, with expertise in the languages and linguistics of the eastern Mediterranean and contiguous regions.



Unstoppable Momentum

The beginning of the pandemic in 2020 presented unforeseen challenges, bringing to a sudden halt many of the Institute’s regular, in-person activities. But the AKU-ISMC’s faculty and students quickly adjusted to the online classroom, and the Institute’s programme of conferences and seminars also continued online. In May 2020, one of the first of a series of occasional papers, named after Founding Director Dr Abdou Filali-Ansary and published online, looked at responses to the pandemic in Syria, Iran and Pakistan. In addition, the short courses for the general public proved a very popular online offering, with over sixteen taking place in 2021 alone. These ranged from specialist courses for the London Metropolitan Police on Islam in Britain, to a course for the general public on Islam and creativity, and an introduction to Arabic codicology.

*“Our cohort experienced a huge shift in experience when Covid-19 altered our mode of study mid-programme. AKU-ISMC was innovative and supportive in delivering the same quality of teaching and learning experience virtually. This type of learning taught me to be more independent and self-motivated in my work and studies.”*

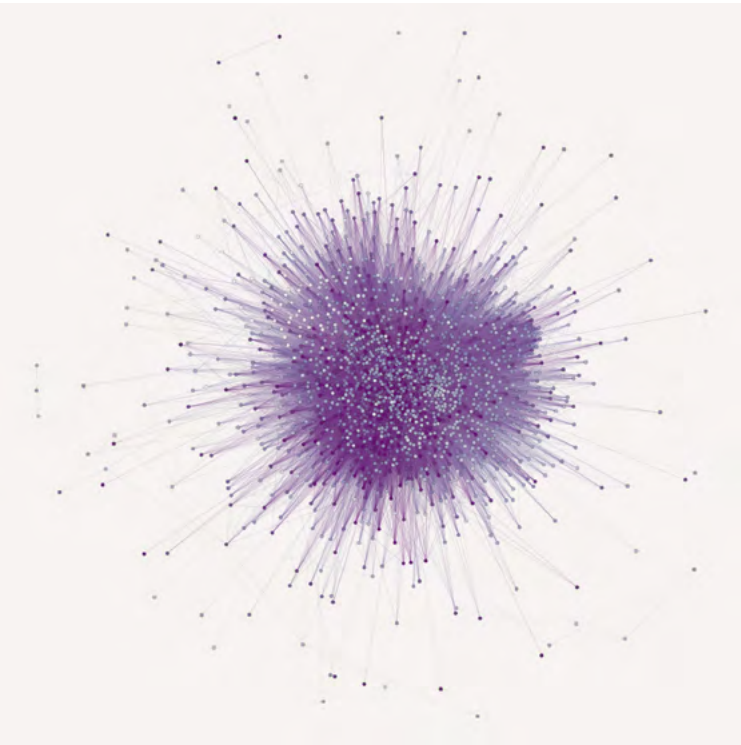


**Sabrina Hajib Zahor.** Graduated 2021. Now Marketing and Communications Manager, RSK Group.



KITAB Goes Massive

Rivalling the move to the new Aga Khan Centre, Dr Bowen Savant received a grant from the European Research Council (ERC) and the Horizon 2020 grant scheme for her KITAB project. This was the first time a scholar at AKU-ISMC had received external funding from the ERC. The generous funding allowed KITAB to set itself up properly with a team of researchers. In the years since, KITAB has received further grants from the National Library of Qatar and the Mellon Foundation. The team of international post-doctoral fellows attracted to do research on the project has helped confirm AKU-ISMC's position as a centre for scholarship on the history of Islam.



At present, the team has compiled over 1.5 million files documenting the relationships between pairs of books and has developed applications for exploring this data. And the other major focus of the project is corpus-building. The team has built the largest existing corpus of machine-readable Arabic book files, featuring 10,356 works, 6,350 of which are unique titles (totalling over 2 billion words). Team members work with partners on ways to convert works in print into machine-readable format and are also starting work on hand-written texts. All team members and partners are academics who publish research regularly.

The KITAB team is currently working on two publications, and all data will be made freely available in 2023 through kitab-project.org. Building on the work of KITAB, a Centre for Digital Humanities has been created. It will host KITAB plus other projects by researchers working with the Arabic language as well as those languages using Arabic script.



(above) KITAB research team.  
(left) A graph of all the text and re-use by all the authors in the KITAB corpus who died before 900/1494.

Developments in Governance

Just before moving to King's Cross, Dr Topan organised in early 2018 a conference on *Governance and Islam in East Africa* under the umbrella of the Governance Programme. In the same year, visiting professor Majid Hannoum organised an international workshop on *Rethinking the Arab Spring and its Aftermath in the Maghreb*. In 2019, Dr. Sanaa Alimia joined AKU-ISMC as Faculty Coordinator for the Programme, and the same year saw the publication of the volume of papers from 2017's *Governance and Gender* conference. Dr Parolin and Governance Programme research fellow Dr Nancy Hawker also organised a conference in the autumn of 2019 on translating Arabic legal discourses, and in 2022, the programme hosted the *International Society for Islamic Legal Studies (ISILS) Triennial Conference*.

In order to encourage wider participation in the discussion of governance, the Programme has also offered fellowships to postdoctoral researchers, scholars and practitioners, as well as funding awards for current and former AKU-ISMC students for conference participation. A founding principle of the Governance Programme has been to ensure materials produced by the programme are accessible to a wider public through its lectures (online and in person), publications, media (YouTube videos and podcasts) and webpages.



**Dr Sanaa Alimia** is Assistant Professor and Faculty Coordinator for the Governance Programme. Her research focuses on surveillance, governance and migration.

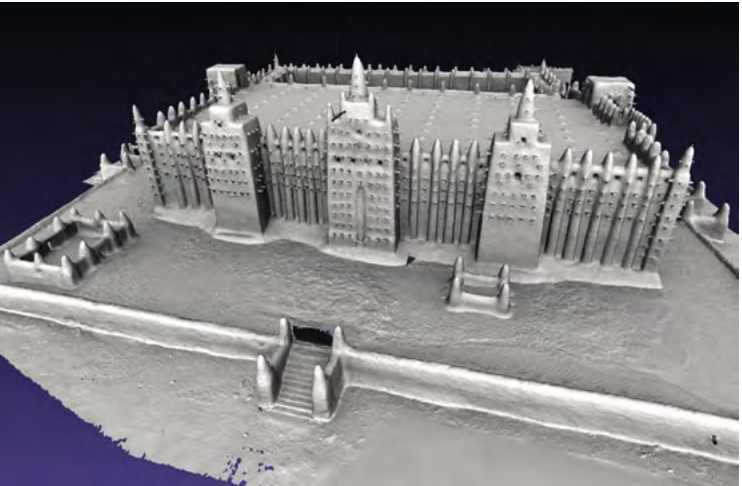
(right) 'The Black Monuments Matter' online exhibition looks at important monuments across the African continent, including the Djenné mosque in Mali.

Beyond the Indian Ocean

One of the first conferences hosted at the Institute's new home was *Muslim Cultures of the Indian Ocean* in the autumn of 2018 and a volume of papers from it is due out in the Exploring Muslim Contexts series early in 2023. Dr Pradines has also established, in cooperation with the Dutch publisher Brill, *The Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World*. Published since 2020 both in hard copy and Open Access, the journal offers itself as a forum for scholarship on underexplored Muslim regions outside of the Middle East and North Africa – particularly the Indian Ocean region, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, India, Southeast Asia and Europe.

In June 2021, AKU-ISMC signed an historic memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Higher Education in the Republic of the Maldives, formalising a number of shared research initiatives and securing places for up to five Maldivian students each year on AKU-ISMC's MA in Muslim Cultures.

During the pandemic, Dr Pradines curated the online exhibition, with the Zamani Project, 'Black Monuments Matter' (<https://black-monuments-matter.zamaniproject.org/>).






Arts and Popular Culture

With the arrival of Dr Otterbeck, a new direction of research at AKU-ISMC has begun to focus on creativity in Muslim contexts in relation to wider social, economic or consumer culture contexts. And in 2019, the Institute hosted, together with the Aga Khan Music Initiative, an evening of music by musicians from across the Muslim world.

With the Aga Khan Music Foundation, Dr Otterbeck has also launched a new series at Edinburgh University Press of Music and Performance in Muslim Contexts. The first title, his *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music*, came out in autumn 2021 both in hard copy and as full Open Access. The effort to increase the impact of the Institute’s publications is also visible in its commitment to making as many of its publications as possible Open Access. To date, over 18,800 copies across AKU-ISMC’s publication list have been downloaded globally from AKU’s eCommons repository.

In the spring of 2022, *Islamic Pop* was followed by Walter Feldman’s *From Rumi to the Whirling Dervishes: Music, Poetry and Mysticism in the Ottoman Empire*. And there are at least three more titles on the way for the series.

These efforts have attracted interest both within and outside academia, and 2022 has seen the inauguration of the Rasul-Walker Endowed Chair in Popular Culture in Islam at AKU-ISMC. Dr Otterbeck is the chair’s first occupant. Around



**Dr Jonas Otterbeck** is Professor of Islamic Studies, Head of Research and holder of the Rasul-Walker Endowed Chair in Popular Culture in Islam. He engages in research about contemporary Islam, often with political relevance. His most recent research is on Islamic pop music.

the same time the position of the Tejpar Professor of Inter-Religious Studies was endowed, and Dr Wood became its first holder.

April 2022 witnessed a new direction for the Institute’s examination of popular culture with Dr Stenberg’s research workshop focusing on the relationship between football and religion. This will be followed in autumn 2022 by both a short course and exhibition at the Aga Khan Centre Gallery on the subject.



(above and left) Performers in the programme of the Aga Khan Music Initiative, Aga Khan Centre, 2019.

(facing page) AKU-ISMC Publications up to Spring 2022.

Publications Going Forward

With the move to the new centre, there were a series of landmark publications by AKU-ISMC. The first was in the Institute’s In Translation series, and was an English edition of Hussein Ahmad Amin’s bestselling *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide*. The following year, the series welcomed the publication of Aziz al-Azmeh’s *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas and Consequences* in the Institute’s In Translation series.

There were also significant publications outside the Institute’s usual series with the translations of Baudouin Dupret’s *What is the Sharia* and Georges Corm’s *Arab Political Thought*. And 2019’s *At the Corner of a Dream: A Journey of Revolution and Resistance: The Street Art of Bahia Shehab* was greeted not just with a book launch but an exhibition in the centre’s gallery.

The pandemic was perhaps unsurprisingly a very productive time for AKU-ISMC Publications. In addition to the new music and performance series, the period also saw the publication of two new titles in the In Translation series by an important figure in the Iranian reform movement, Mohsen Kadivar. His *Human Rights and Reformist Islam* and *Blasphemy and Apostasy in Islam: Debates on Shi’ite Jurisprudence* challenge the status

quo of thinking both in and outside Iran. And Drs Stenberg and Wood published in early 2022 the volume of papers from their 2019 workshop entitled *What is Islamic Studies? European and North American Approaches to a Contested Field*. Dr Stenberg also published a few months later his timely history of Kuwait – as seen through the life of one of its citizens: *Poet and Businessman: Abd al-Aziz al-Babtain and the Formation of Modern Kuwait*.

The Abdou Filali-Ansary Occasional Papers series has provided another forum for showcasing the scholarly work of faculty, alumni and others who have worked closely with the Institute. Seven papers have been published on AKU’s eCommons website so far.

In addition to this are the writing achievements of the Institute’s faculty beyond AKU-ISMC Publications. They include Dr Lyon’s 2019 *Political Kinship in Pakistan: Descent, Marriage and Government Stability*, as well as his editorship since 2020 of the *Social Science Computer Review* (SAGE journal). In 2021, Dr Wood’s *Imam of the Christians* came out, followed this year by Dr Adak’s *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in Turkey: State, Society and Gender in the Early Republic*.





Future Directions

AKU-ISMC is currently growing in almost every conceivable direction. Dr Spellman-Poots has been appointed to administer the new dual Master’s programme between the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, New York and AKU-ISMC, allowing students to study for a year at each campus. The first cohort for this degree is flourishing. In addition, in 2023 the Institute will also host the British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS).

Collaboration between AKU-ISMC and the university’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences (AKU-FAS) lies at the heart of AKU’s aim to establish a world-class liberal arts offering as part of a comprehensive university. Located in Karachi, AKU-FAS will offer a new liberal arts undergraduate programme, with the first cohort arriving in the autumn of 2023. AKU-ISMC’s faculty and senior leadership have been integral in curricula development for this new initiative. And the Institute’s faculty will form part of the seamless, global pedagogical team on the new programme following its inauguration.

Also further enhancing the Institute’s educational offering is the design of the new overarching AKU Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) – AKU-ISMC PhD Programme in Humanities and Social Sciences.

Through the collaboration between AKU-ISMC and AKU-FAS, a sustainable and internationally leading academic

environment will be created that supports the university’s aim to produce research at the highest international level and education founded on a multidisciplinary learning experience. This also strengthens AKU’s global role as a bridge between major centres of learning across the globe, in which different intellectual traditions are debated and advanced in innovative ways. In a very real sense, AKU-FAS and AKU-ISMC allow AKU to begin to establish a genuine intellectual ‘school’ of thought that is unique in the world.

Going forward, AKU-ISMC is capitalising on its existing strengths to develop a coherent reputation for excellence in research-led teaching and learning both in its MA in Muslim Cultures and dual degree MA with Columbia University, as well as in a suite of specialist short courses aimed at students, the public and professionals engaged with Muslim contexts (for example, the London Metropolitan Police and Foreign Ministries). These courses are an important part of AKU-ISMC’s broader knowledge transfer and public policy impact strategy.

AKU-ISMC endeavours to increase its relevance in the developing world by providing generous financial support to students where and when necessary. Our student community is multi-denominational, and we encourage a diverse intake of students and scholars to embed and diversify our cross-cutting scholarly identity.



“AKU-ISMC is leading the transformation of AKU into a comprehensive university with a growing presence in arts and sciences. Their leadership in the development of courses and curriculum for the new Faculty of Arts and Sciences has been central to our efforts to launch the new programme.”

Carl Amrhein, Provost and Vice President, AKU

A Very Big Thank You

The Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations is first and foremost about people. The Institute was created thanks to the vision and extraordinarily generous and constant support of our Chancellor, His Highness, Aga Khan IV. It has been sustained by the wise leadership of the President, Provost and Trustees of the Aga Khan University. And it has been generously funded by donors who believe in the people and the work of AKU-ISMC. I would also like to thank all the colleagues, students, scholars and donors who have supported, studied, worked at and visited the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations over

the past twenty years. Your contributions to courses, research projects, seminars, workshops and conferences have been invaluable. Through your presence, hard work and generosity, you have supported the establishment of AKU-ISMC, and have helped to develop it into a multidisciplinary, friendly and successful environment. It is our hope that you will continue to support AKU-ISMC in the future and contribute to its growth onwards and upwards.

Dr Leif Stenberg, Dean and Professor of Islamic Studies, AKU-ISMC.

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“From Bedford Square to Euston to AKC, what has remained consistent at AKU-ISMC is the care for the development of its staff and students and the collegiality that makes it a wonderful place. Everyone experiences these attributes in its culture whether through the extraordinary dedication of faculty in the classroom and beyond or at the famous lunch table, which is a platform for discussions, for generating intellectually stimulating ideas and for enjoying sounds of laughter and joy!”

Saima Ali, HR Manager, Head of Administration and then Global HR Director Academics, 2005–2022.



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